




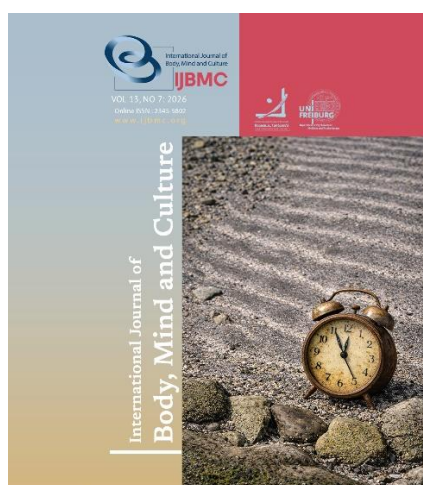
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Linguistic and Social Adaptation Challenges of Repatriated Kazakh Children in Kazakhstani Schools

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study examines the linguistic and social adaptation challenges experienced by repatriated Kazakh children in Kazakhstani secondary schools. It focuses on students' competence in Kazakh and Russian, the linguistic barriers they encounter in school settings, and the role of family, teachers, and peers in supporting their adaptation.

Methods and Materials: The study employed a mixed-methods design, combining a quantitative questionnaire with semi-structured interviews. The quantitative phase involved 250 repatriated Kazakh students in grades 8–11 from schools in Almaty, Astana, Mangystau, and Turkistan. The questionnaire examined demographic background, language competence and use, linguistic challenges, and social support. The qualitative phase included semi-structured interviews with 35 students from different countries of origin, including China, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, and Turkmenistan, to explore their experiences of school adaptation in greater depth.

Findings: The results show that many repatriated students demonstrate stronger oral competence in Kazakh than in academic literacy, particularly in reading and writing. Russian language acquisition emerged as a major barrier, especially for students with limited prior exposure to Russian or Cyrillic-based schooling. Students also reported difficulties with the Cyrillic script, understanding study materials, expressing themselves confidently, and adapting to dialectal differences. Family encouragement, teacher assistance, and classroom support helped students cope with these challenges and develop greater confidence in communication.

Conclusion: The adaptation of repatriated Kazakh children is shaped by language proficiency, prior educational background, school environment, and social support. The findings highlight the need for targeted language-bridging programs, inclusive teaching practices, and stronger school-based support for young repatriates in Kazakhstan.

Keywords: Repatriated Kazakh Students, Qandas, Linguistic Adaptation, Social Adaptation, School Integration, Language Support, Kazakhstan.

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Introduction

As noted by [Ndreka \(2019\)](#), migration is a growing phenomenon in today's globalized world. It is a dynamic and complex process, making the regulation and management of human mobility a challenging task for governments. Migration has always been a central phenomenon shaping societies, cultures, and languages. [\(Tsuda, 2009\)](#) highlights that ethnic return migration is not unique to Kazakhstan but is part of a broader global process. Since Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991, it has initiated active policies to support and engage ethnic Kazakhs residing both near and far abroad and to encourage their return to the historical homeland.

At the time of independence, about five million ethnic Kazakhs were living outside Kazakhstan across more than 40 countries. According to [Tuseeva & Isahova \(2007\)](#), more than 1.1 million ethnic Kazakhs have returned since 1991. Over the past five years, the majority of ethnic Kazakhs repatriating to Kazakhstan have primarily originated from China, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, Turkmenistan, Russia, and other countries. This continuing migration process has important implications for education, language policy, and the social integration of repatriated families and their children.

In the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Population Migration," the terms "repatriate" and "oralman" were previously used in official discourse. However, the terminology used to refer to ethnic Kazakhs who have returned from abroad has been subject to both scholarly and public discussion. In September 2020, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, announced the discontinuation of the term "oralman" and suggested replacing it with "qandas." Following this initiative, the term "qandas" has increasingly been used in legal, public, and academic contexts to refer to ethnic Kazakhs returning to Kazakhstan. In this article, the term "qandas" is used consistently to refer to repatriated ethnic Kazakhs and their children.

As noted by [Zharkynbekova et al. \(2025\)](#), the term "qandas" carries a broad and profound meaning. In Kazakh, it denotes "kinship," "tribal belonging," and "blood ties." The author emphasizes that this concept reflects the spiritual and ethnic unity of the Kazakh people, symbolizing their historical cohesion, cultural

integrity, and national continuity. Thus, the replacement of the term "oralman" with "qandas" represents not only a linguistic modification but also an important social and cultural transformation. This change reflects Kazakhstan's effort to reinforce national cohesion, reshape public perception, and affirm the national identity of ethnic Kazakhs who have returned to their historical homeland.

Over the past two decades, scholarly interest in Kazakh return migration has significantly increased. Several Kazakhstani and international researchers have examined the issues of repatriates' integration and linguistic adaptation within Kazakhstan's social context. [Amangul \(2012\)](#) points out that encouraging ethnic Kazakhs from abroad to return to their homeland is a central aspect of Kazakhstan's immigration policy, aimed at strengthening national identity and preserving traditional Kazakh culture. [Cerny \(2010\)](#) adds that one important motivation for return migration is the desire to secure a better future for children. Parents are often highly motivated to improve their children's living and educational conditions.

However, adaptation to the new social and educational environment is not always easy. [Dyussenova et al., \(2025\)](#) emphasizes that repatriates encounter a dual challenge: adapting to new educational and social contexts while preserving their cultural identity. [Fierman \(2005\)](#) also emphasizes that language issues remain highly visible in Kazakhstan's sociolinguistic environment: although Kazakh remained dominant in rural areas by the end of the Soviet era, a significant share of urban ethnic Kazakhs had already shifted to Russian. Therefore, qandas children entering Kazakhstani schools often face a complex multilingual environment in which Kazakh, Russian, and increasingly English perform different social and educational functions.

According to [Dyussenova et al. \(2025\)](#), one of the most serious linguistic difficulties for repatriates during adaptation is limited proficiency in Russian, as well as differences and variations in the Kazakh language. [Terlikbayeva \(2017\)](#) concludes that the adaptation and integration of repatriates into society are important issues, partly because returnees may encounter different attitudes from the local population. Similarly, [Amangul \(2012\)](#) notes that ethnic Kazakhs from different countries may experience language problems in Kazakh

and/or Russian. Language competence is one of the main factors affecting social integration. These observations are consistent with broader research showing that language skills play an important role in the integration process of immigrants (Isphording & Otten, 2011).

Although Kazakh and Russian remain the central languages shaping Kazakhstan's sociolinguistic reality, repatriated Kazakh children do not all enter school with the same linguistic background. Their language experience depends on their country of origin, previous schooling, family language practices, and exposure to different scripts and educational systems. Children from China, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, Turkmenistan, Russia, and other countries may therefore differ in their knowledge of Kazakh, Russian, Cyrillic script, and academic language. This diversity makes their school adaptation particularly important to examine.

Unfortunately, not every child can adapt easily to the unfamiliar realities that surround them. Nabivacheva (2006) stresses that language adaptation plays a crucial role in the process of socialization, directly influencing the effectiveness of communication. Among the main challenges faced by students in a new linguistic environment are insufficient knowledge of the host language, difficulties in recognizing and performing social roles, and limited awareness of culturally embedded meanings that are evident to local speakers. For repatriated Kazakh children, these challenges may affect classroom communication, peer interaction, and participation in school life.

According to Zharkynbekova et al. (2025), ethnic Kazakh repatriates can overcome challenges in the processes of adaptation and integration. Still, these processes may include social difficulties and adjustment to a new cultural environment. Some Qandas students may experience feelings of insecurity due to unfamiliar surroundings or being perceived as different by local peers. In this sense, linguistic adaptation is closely connected with social adaptation: students' ability to use Kazakh and Russian in school is linked to their confidence, participation, and sense of belonging.

The linguistic and social adaptation of repatriated Kazakh schoolchildren has therefore become an important issue in Kazakhstan's education system. These students are descendants of ethnic Kazakhs whose families historically lived outside Kazakhstan for political, social, and historical reasons, including

collectivization, famine, repression, and border changes in the twentieth century. While returning to Kazakhstan creates opportunities for strengthening national and cultural identity, many children still face linguistic and social challenges as they adapt to new educational environments.

Most ethnic Kazakh families return to Kazakhstan with young children. This situation requires special attention from the education system, particularly in planning adaptation programs, providing language support, ensuring inclusive school environments, and facilitating children's linguistic and social integration. Repatriated Kazakh children are an important group for integration and adaptation processes because their successful school inclusion has implications for their future educational trajectories and participation in Kazakhstani society.

Despite increasing attention to Kazakh migration and integration, the school-based linguistic and social adaptation of repatriated Kazakh children remains insufficiently examined. In particular, more attention is needed to students' language competence, difficulties in learning Kazakh and Russian, social support from teachers, peers, and families, and how school environments facilitate or complicate adaptation. Therefore, this study examines the linguistic and social adaptation challenges of repatriated Kazakh children in Kazakhstani secondary schools.

The following research question guides the study: What linguistic challenges do repatriated Kazakh children face when learning Kazakh and Russian in school and in daily life? How do repatriated students adapt to the sociolinguistic environment in Kazakhstan, including peer and teacher interactions? What forms of support facilitate their language acquisition and social adaptation process? How does language learning influence their sense of identity, belonging, and future aspirations in Kazakhstan?

Methods and Materials

Study Design

To examine the linguistic and social adaptation of repatriated Kazakh children, this study employed a mixed-methods research design that integrated quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data. More specifically, the study followed an explanatory

sequential mixed-methods design, in which the quantitative questionnaire was administered first, followed by semi-structured interviews. The interview phase was used to explain and expand the survey findings by providing more detailed accounts of students' experiences of language learning, school communication, and social support.

The quantitative component provided general information about students' language competence, language use, linguistic challenges, and perceived support from family, teachers, and peers. The qualitative component allowed a deeper understanding of how repatriated Kazakh students experienced adaptation in Kazakhstani schools. The integration of the two types of data was conducted at the interpretation stage: survey results were used to identify the main patterns of linguistic and social adaptation, while interview data were used to clarify, contextualize, and illustrate these patterns.

Participants and Sampling

This research was conducted in secondary schools in Kazakhstan, including schools located in Almaty, Astana, Mangystau, and Turkistan. These regions were selected because they are among the areas where repatriated Kazakh families from Uzbekistan, China, Mongolia, Turkmenistan, Russia, and other countries have settled. The participating schools included Kazakh-medium and mixed-language schools, where students were exposed to Kazakh as the state language and, to varying degrees, to Russian as a language of instruction, communication, or school-related interaction.

The quantitative sample comprised 250 repatriated Kazakh schoolchildren in grades 8–11. The students' ages ranged from 14 to 17 years. Among the respondents, 100 students were from Uzbekistan, 70 from China, 35 from Mongolia, 25 from Turkmenistan, and 20 from Russia. Overall, 43% of the respondents were male, and 57% were female. The distribution of participants by country of origin is reported in Table 1.

Participants were recruited through school administrations and teachers, with permission from the participating schools. A purposive sampling strategy was used because the study focused specifically on repatriated Kazakh students enrolled in Kazakhstani secondary schools. The inclusion criteria were as follows: students had to be ethnic Kazakh repatriates or children of repatriated Kazakh families; they had to be

enrolled in grades 8–11; they had to be between 14 and 17 years old; and they had to have experience of studying in Kazakhstan after returning from another country. Students were excluded if they were not from repatriated Kazakh families, were outside the target grade and age range, or were unable to complete the questionnaire independently.

The response rate was calculated based on the number of students who received the questionnaire and returned valid responses. Only fully completed questionnaires were included in the final analysis. Information on years since arrival in Kazakhstan was collected as part of the demographic section of the questionnaire, because length of residence may influence language competence, familiarity with the Cyrillic script, school adjustment, and interaction with teachers and peers.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 repatriated Kazakh students selected from the survey participants. Interview participants were selected purposively to represent different countries of origin, gender groups, and language backgrounds. Among the respondents interviewed, 14 were from Uzbekistan, 10 from China, 6 from Mongolia, and 5 from Turkmenistan. The qualitative sample did not include students from Russia; therefore, the country-of-origin distribution is reported separately for the quantitative and qualitative phases. To ensure consistency with the quantitative sample, the interview participants were also limited to students in grades 8–11 and aged 14–17 years.

Instruments

Data collection included a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with repatriated Kazakh children. The questionnaire was designed to explore the linguistic and social adaptation experiences of repatriated Kazakh students, focusing on their language competence, language use, difficulties in learning Kazakh and Russian, and sources of support in school and daily life.

The questionnaire consisted of 47 questions, including multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended items. To ensure consistency in reporting, the questionnaire was organized into four sections. The first section collected demographic information, including age, gender, grade level, country of origin, year of arrival in Kazakhstan, native language, previous language of schooling, and languages used in childhood settings. The

second section examined language competence and use, including students' self-assessed speaking, reading, listening, and writing skills in Kazakh, Russian, English, and other languages. The third section focused on linguistic challenges, such as understanding Russian, learning the Cyrillic script, understanding study materials, expressing oneself, adapting to dialectal differences, and building confidence in communication. The fourth section examined social support and school adaptation, including support from family members,

teachers, classmates, and the broader school environment.

The questionnaire items dealing with confidence, classroom participation, support, and belonging were treated as indicators of social adaptation and perceived support. They were not treated as a validated psychological adjustment scale. Therefore, the study does not claim to measure psychological adaptation in the clinical or psychometric sense.

Table 1

Structure of the questionnaire

Questionnaire section	Item numbers
Demographic background	1-8
Language competence and use	9-14
Linguistic challenges	15-20
Social support and school adaptation	21-47

The semi-structured interview guide consisted of 20 open-ended questions. The interviews focused on students' experiences of linguistic and social adaptation, including difficulties learning Kazakh and Russian, interactions with teachers and peers, the support they received at school and at home, and their sense of belonging in the school environment.

Data Collection Procedure

Repatriated Kazakh students completed the questionnaire in their classrooms after classes. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. It took approximately 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

The interview phase was conducted after the survey. Each interview lasted approximately 20–25 minutes. Interviews were conducted mainly in Kazakh, as this was the preferred language of most participants and allowed them to express their experiences more comfortably. Where necessary, Russian or explanatory language support was used to clarify questions. With participants' permission, interviews were recorded or documented through detailed written notes. The interview materials were transcribed and prepared for thematic analysis. Identifying information was removed during transcription, and pseudonyms were used when reporting interview quotations.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative data were processed using SPSS version 22. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to summarize students' demographic characteristics, language competence, language use, linguistic challenges, and sources of support. In addition, correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships among selected variables, including language competence, linguistic difficulties, participation in language courses, perceived teacher support, peer support, and confidence in communication.

To strengthen the quantitative analysis, comparisons were also made according to country of origin, years since arrival in Kazakhstan, and level of teacher or peer support. Chi-square tests were used for categorical variables, while Spearman's correlation coefficients were used for ordinal variables. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. These analyses were conducted to determine whether students' adaptation experiences differed depending on previous linguistic background, length of residence, and perceived social support.

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's alpha. Because the questionnaire included different types of items, including demographic, language-related, social-support, and adaptation-related questions, reliability was calculated only for relevant multi-item subscales rather than for the entire 47-item questionnaire.

Demographic items were not included in the reliability calculation. Reliability was examined separately for

language competence and use, linguistic challenges, and social support/school adaptation.

Table 2

Reliability statistics for questionnaire subscales

Subscale	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Language competence and use	6	0.84
Linguistic challenges	6	0.81
Social support and school adaptation	12	0.86
Overall adaptation-related items	24	0.87

Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. After transcription, the interview texts were read several times to become familiar with the data. Initial codes were developed from recurring themes related to language difficulties, Russian language learning, the Cyrillic script, written Kazakh, teacher support, peer interaction, family support, confidence in communication, and a sense of belonging.

The coding process combined deductive and inductive procedures. The research questions and questionnaire findings informed some codes, while others emerged directly from students' interview responses. Related codes were then grouped into broader themes reflecting the main aspects of students' adaptation experiences. The main themes included difficulties in Russian language acquisition, the transition to Cyrillic-based literacy, challenges in academic communication, the roles of teachers and classmates, family support, and the gradual development of confidence in school communication.

To improve the credibility of the analysis, the coding was reviewed by members of the research team. Disagreements in interpretation were discussed until consensus was reached. The final themes were compared with the quantitative findings to identify areas of convergence and to explain them. The interview data were therefore used not only as illustrative quotations but also as qualitative evidence that helped explain the statistical patterns observed in the survey results.

Ethical Considerations

Because the study involved minors, ethical procedures were followed throughout the research process. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the administrations of the participating schools. Parents or legal guardians were informed of the study's purpose and procedures, and student assent was

obtained before participation. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences.

Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. The questionnaire responses were analyzed anonymously, and no identifying information was reported in the findings. Pseudonyms were used for interview participants. Interview data were stored securely and were used only for research purposes.

During the interviews, students were allowed to skip any question that made them uncomfortable. If a participant showed signs of emotional discomfort, the interview was paused or stopped, and the student could be referred to the responsible school staff member or school psychologist, in accordance with school procedures. These measures were taken to ensure that participation did not cause harm or pressure to the students.

Findings and Results

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative data were analyzed after the survey was completed. The analysis helped identify the main linguistic and social adaptation challenges experienced by repatriated Kazakh students in Kazakhstani secondary schools. The findings are presented according to language competence, linguistic challenges, and social support in learning Kazakh and Russian.

The survey included 250 repatriated Kazakh students from five countries of origin: Uzbekistan, China, Mongolia, Turkmenistan, and Russia. As shown in Table 3, the largest group of respondents came from Uzbekistan, followed by China, Mongolia, Turkmenistan, and Russia. The participants were students in grades 8–11, aged 14–17.

Table 3*Demographic information of survey respondents*

Country of origin	Number of respondents	%	Age/grade distribution	Male	Female
Uzbekistan	100	40	Grades 8–11 / 14–17 years	45	55
China	70	28	Grades 8–11 / 14–17 years	30	40
Mongolia	35	14	Grades 8–11 / 14–17 years	15	20
Turkmenistan	25	10	Grades 8–11 / 14–17 years	10	15
Russia	20	8	Grades 8–11 / 14–17 years	8	12
Total	250	100	Grades 8–11 / 14–17 years	108 / 43%	142 / 57%

Language Competence and Use

The survey results show that repatriated Kazakh students reported stronger competence in oral Kazakh than in written Kazakh. The majority of respondents reported good or excellent competence in Kazakh

speaking and listening, while lower levels were observed in reading and writing. This suggests that, although many students were able to communicate orally in Kazakh, academic literacy remained a challenge for a considerable proportion of respondents.

Table 4*Self-reported language competence of repatriated Kazakh students*

Language skill	The main tendency reported by students
Kazakh speaking	70.8% reported good or excellent competence; 16.6% reported difficulty speaking
Kazakh listening/comprehension	70.8% reported good or excellent competence; 4.1% reported difficulty understanding
Kazakh reading	54.1% reported good or excellent competence; 12.5% reported difficulty reading
Kazakh writing	50.0% reported good or excellent competence; 12.5% reported difficulty writing
Russian speaking	58.3% reported struggling to speak Russian; 33.3% reported not speaking Russian at all
Russian comprehension	41.6% reported that they did not understand Russian
English speaking	20.8% reported fluency; 54.1% reported not speaking English at all
English reading	30.2% reported fluency
English writing	37.5% reported fluency

The results indicate that the main distinction in Kazakh language adaptation was between oral communication and academic literacy. Many students were able to understand and speak Kazakh in everyday contexts, but reading and writing in Kazakh, particularly in Cyrillic script and academic tasks, were more difficult. Russian presented a greater barrier than Kazakh. More than half of the respondents reported difficulty speaking Russian, and a large proportion reported limited comprehension of Russian. This finding is important because Russian is still used in many social, educational, and institutional contexts in Kazakhstan.

English proficiency was generally lower than Kazakh proficiency and varied across skills. Some respondents

reported stronger reading and writing abilities in English than speaking ability, which may reflect the role of formal school instruction rather than everyday communication.

Linguistic Challenges

The respondents identified several linguistic challenges that affected their adaptation to Kazakhstani schools. As shown in Table 5, the most frequently reported difficulties were understanding Russian, followed by a lack of confidence in the linguistic environment, understanding study materials, inability to express oneself, learning the Cyrillic script, adapting to dialectal differences, and speaking Kazakh fluently.

Table 5*Linguistic challenges faced by repatriated Kazakh students upon arrival in Kazakhstan*

Linguistic challenge	% of respondents
Understanding Russian	58
Lack of confidence in the linguistic environment	45
Understanding study materials	41
Inability to express oneself	37

Learning the Cyrillic script	35
Adapting to dialectal differences	33
Speaking Kazakh fluently	20
Other difficulties	12

The most common challenge was understanding Russian. Since Russian remains widely used in Kazakhstan, limited proficiency in Russian may affect students' academic participation, interaction with peers, and access to school-related information. Another notable issue was the lack of confidence in the linguistic environment, reported by 45% of respondents. This suggests that linguistic adaptation is not limited to grammar or vocabulary but also encompasses students' confidence in using the language in the classroom and in social situations.

A considerable proportion of students also reported difficulties in understanding study materials and expressing themselves. These challenges may influence students' academic performance and participation in lessons. Learning the Cyrillic script was another

important barrier, especially for students who had previously studied in Arabic-based, Latin-based, or other writing systems before arriving in Kazakhstan. Dialectal differences were also mentioned, showing that even students with knowledge of Kazakh may encounter unfamiliar pronunciation, vocabulary, or speech patterns in Kazakhstan.

Social Support in Learning Kazakh and Russian

The survey also examined the role of family, teachers, and classmates in supporting students' language learning. The results show that support was more visible for Kazakh than for Russian. As presented in Table 6, parents, teachers, and classmates were identified as important sources of support in learning Kazakh. However, support for Russian was reported less frequently.

Table 6

Social support in learning Kazakh and Russian

Response options	Kazakh language (%)	Russian language (%)
Parents provided support	35	25
Teachers provided support	35	—
Classmates provided support	30	—
Did not receive any support	20	—
Did not face any difficulties	40	20

The findings indicate that family support was an important factor in learning Kazakh, with 35% of respondents reporting parental support. Teachers also played an important role, with 35% of students reporting receiving support from them in learning Kazakh. Classmate support was reported by 30% of respondents. At the same time, 20% of students reported not receiving any support, suggesting that not all students had access to consistent assistance during the adaptation process.

The table also shows that 40% of respondents reported no major difficulties in learning Kazakh, while only 20% reported no difficulties in learning Russian. This difference confirms that Russian was generally more challenging for many repatriated Kazakh students than Kazakh. However, the data should be interpreted cautiously because the questionnaire did not measure

the speed of language acquisition or the effect of length of residence in Kazakhstan.

Qualitative Findings

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 repatriated Kazakh students. The qualitative sample included 14 participants from Uzbekistan, 10 from China, 6 from Mongolia, and 5 from Turkmenistan. Unlike the quantitative sample, the interview sample did not include students from Russia. Therefore, the country-of-origin distribution for the qualitative sample is reported separately from that of the survey sample.

The interview data were analyzed thematically. The main themes identified from the interviews were: difficulties with Cyrillic-based literacy, Russian-language barriers, differences between spoken Kazakh and academic Kazakh, the role of prior schooling, teacher and peer support, and the gradual development of confidence in school communication.

Difficulties in Cyrillic-Based Literacy

One of the strongest themes in the interviews was the difficulty of adapting to Cyrillic-based reading and writing. Students from China, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan reported that they could often understand spoken Kazakh but found written tasks difficult due to differences in script and prior schooling.

For example, one student from Turkmenistan stated:

“I understand when people speak Kazakh, but I cannot write properly. The letters are different. At school in Turkmenistan, we used the Latin script. It was very confusing at first. Russian is even harder because I never studied it before.” (*Maksat, 14 years old, Turkmenistan*)

This quotation illustrates that the challenge was not simply a lack of Kazakh knowledge. Rather, students had to adjust to a new writing system, academic vocabulary, and school literacy practices.

Russian Language as a Major Barrier

The interviews confirmed the survey finding that Russian was one of the most difficult languages for many repatriated Kazakh students. Students with limited or no prior exposure to Russian reported difficulty understanding teachers, communicating with classmates, and completing tasks involving Russian-language materials.

A student from China explained: “I fully understand lessons in Kazakh. I can express my ideas freely during classes. However, written tasks in Kazakh and Russian are difficult for me. I sometimes feel uncomfortable asking or answering questions in class. I did not understand Russian at first, and I struggled to speak.” (*Aizere, 15 years old, China*)

This response indicates that the student had sufficient spoken Kazakh for classroom communication but still had difficulty with written Kazakh and Russian. It also indicates that language barriers may affect students’ confidence in participating in class.

Differences in Previous Schooling and Language Background

Interview responses showed that students’ adaptation experiences varied by country of origin and prior educational background. Students from Uzbekistan often reported some familiarity with Russian because Russian had been taught at school, but they still found Russian grammar and academic use difficult after arriving in Kazakhstan.

One participant from Uzbekistan stated: “I could understand some Russian words because I learned it at school, but I never studied the language seriously. When I came to Kazakhstan, I could speak Kazakh, but reading and writing were difficult because of the new alphabet. Russian was even harder, especially grammar.” (*Aruzhan, 15 years old, Samarkand region*)

This finding indicates that prior exposure to Russian did not always lead to sufficient proficiency for school adaptation. Students needed additional support to use Russian and written Kazakh in academic contexts.

Teacher, Peer, and Family Support

The interviews also highlighted the importance of teacher, peer, and family support. Several students reported that teachers explained tasks in simpler Kazakh, allowed them more time to complete written work, or helped them understand new terminology. Some students also received help from classmates, especially in understanding school routines and classroom instructions.

However, the level of support was not the same for all students. Some participants reported feeling uncomfortable asking questions because they were afraid of making mistakes or of being judged by classmates. This suggests that supportive school environments are essential for improving students’ confidence and participation.

Gradual Development of Confidence and Belonging

The qualitative findings suggest that students’ confidence developed gradually as they became more familiar with school language, classroom expectations, and peer communication. Students who received support from teachers and classmates appeared to adapt more easily to the school environment. However, students with limited proficiency in Russian or difficulties with written Kazakh continued to face barriers to academic communication.

Overall, the interview data support the quantitative findings. Both sets of data show that repatriated Kazakh students generally reported stronger oral Kazakh than written Kazakh, while Russian language acquisition and Cyrillic-based literacy remained major challenges. The qualitative findings further explain why these challenges occurred: students came from different educational systems, used different scripts before arrival, and had unequal levels of exposure to Russian and academic Kazakh.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of the survey and interview findings shows that several interrelated factors shape the linguistic and social adaptation of repatriated Kazakh students. First, oral Kazakh competence does not necessarily mean full academic readiness in Kazakh. Many students could communicate in Kazakh but still struggled with reading, writing, and subject-based academic language. Second, Russian was a significant barrier for many students, particularly those from countries where it was not widely used in schooling or daily life. Third, script transition played an important role in adaptation, especially for students who had previously studied in Arabic-based or Latin-based writing systems. Fourth, family, teacher, and peer support helped students overcome linguistic barriers, but this support was not equally available to all respondents.

Therefore, the findings suggest that repatriated Kazakh students require targeted support in academic Kazakh, beginner or intermediate Russian, Cyrillic literacy, and classroom communication. The results also show that social support is closely connected to language adaptation, because students' confidence and participation depend not only on language proficiency but also on the support they receive in the school environment.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that repatriated Kazakh students experience adaptation to Kazakhstani schools as a complex linguistic and social process. Although many respondents reported relatively strong oral competence in Kazakh, difficulties persisted in academic literacy, particularly in reading and writing. This distinction between everyday oral communication and school-based literacy is important because students who can communicate in Kazakh in informal contexts may still require support in understanding study materials, completing written tasks, and participating confidently in classroom activities. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that language adaptation is closely connected with educational participation and academic success among migrant and repatriated students (Cummins, 2000; Dyussenova et al., 2025).

One of the most significant findings concerns the role of Russian in students' adaptation. The survey results showed that understanding and speaking Russian were among the most frequently reported difficulties. This was also confirmed by the interview data, where students from China, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan described Russian as a language that required additional time and support. Although Kazakh is the state language and a key marker of national identity, Russian remains important in many academic, social, and institutional contexts in Kazakhstan. Therefore, limited proficiency in Russian may restrict students' ability to communicate with peers, understand certain school materials, and fully participate in the multilingual environment of Kazakhstani schools. These findings support earlier studies which identified Russian-language competence as one of the major challenges for ethnic Kazakh repatriates (Fierman, 2005; Terlikbayeva, 2017).

The study also found that the transition to Cyrillic-based literacy created difficulties for many repatriated students. This was especially evident among students whose previous schooling used Arabic-based, Latin-based, or other writing systems. Interview participants explained that they could often understand spoken Kazakh but struggled with written Kazakh because of differences in script, spelling, and academic vocabulary. This finding suggests that linguistic adaptation should not be understood only as the ability to speak Kazakh. For many Qandas students, successful adaptation also requires systematic support in reading, writing, and subject-based academic language. These results are consistent with studies emphasizing that previous schooling and script background can influence migrant students' integration into new educational systems (Bialystok, 2001; Cummins, 2000).

Another important finding is that students' linguistic challenges varied by their country of origin and prior educational background. Students from Uzbekistan often had some exposure to Russian, but this exposure was not always sufficient for academic use in Kazakhstan. Students from China and Turkmenistan reported greater difficulties with Russian and Cyrillic-based writing. Students from Mongolia may have been more familiar with the Cyrillic script, but they still faced challenges related to academic language, dialectal differences, and school communication. These differences show that repatriated Kazakh children should not be treated as a

homogeneous group. Their adaptation needs depend on their prior language environment, script experience, school system, and the length of their exposure to Kazakhstani education.

The results further indicate that social support plays a crucial role in students' language adaptation. Parents, teachers, and classmates were reported as important sources of support, particularly in learning Kazakh and adjusting to school routines. Family support helped students maintain confidence and motivation, while teacher support was important for understanding lessons and classroom expectations. Peer support also contributed to students' participation in school life, although not all respondents reported it. These findings are consistent with [Zharkynbekova et al. \(2025\)](#), who emphasize the importance of family and social support in the adaptation of ethnic Kazakh students from Mongolia and China.

At the same time, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. The data show that many students reported relatively stronger oral Kazakh competence than written Kazakh or Russian competence, but the study did not directly measure the speed of language acquisition. Therefore, it is not possible to claim that students "quickly" acquire oral Kazakh proficiency unless the duration of residence, previous exposure, and language-learning progress are analyzed longitudinally. A more cautious interpretation is that many students in the sample reported functional oral Kazakh competence, while continuing to face difficulties in academic literacy and Russian language learning.

The qualitative findings strengthen the survey results by showing how students experienced these challenges in daily school life. Interview participants described difficulties with writing, Russian grammar, understanding study materials, asking questions in class, and feeling confident when speaking. These accounts show that linguistic adaptation has a social dimension: students' confidence and participation depend not only on language knowledge but also on how teachers, classmates, and the school environment respond to their needs. Thus, the findings suggest that school adaptation is shaped by the interaction of language competence, previous educational experience, family support, teacher assistance, peer relations, and students' sense of belonging.

Overall, the study contributes to research on Qandas children by showing that their adaptation in Kazakhstani schools is not limited to learning Kazakh as an ethnic or national language. Rather, it involves navigating a multilingual educational environment in which Kazakh, Russian, and, to a lesser extent, English have different functions. For this reason, educational support should address both academic Kazakh literacy and Russian language learning, while also strengthening inclusive classroom practices. Schools need to provide targeted language-bridging programs, additional literacy support, and teacher training focused on culturally responsive pedagogy. Such measures may help repatriated Kazakh students participate more confidently in school and reduce the barriers they experience during adaptation.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the quantitative data were based on students' self-reported language competence and perceived difficulties; therefore, the results do not represent standardized language proficiency scores. Second, the study did not conduct a longitudinal analysis of language development, so it cannot determine the speed of students' language acquisition over time. Third, although the study included students from several countries of origin, the qualitative sample did not include participants from Russia, which limits comparison across all groups represented in the survey. Finally, the study focused on linguistic and social adaptation and did not use validated psychological scales; therefore, claims about psychological adjustment should be limited to students' reported confidence, support, and sense of belonging.

Conclusion

The study's findings indicate that repatriated Kazakh students face linguistic and social challenges in adapting to Kazakhstani secondary schools. Many students reported relatively stronger oral competence in Kazakh, but they continued to experience difficulties in academic literacy, especially reading and writing. The main linguistic barriers included limited Russian proficiency, learning the Cyrillic script, understanding study materials, expressing ideas clearly in classroom contexts, and adapting to dialectal differences.

The results also show that students' adaptation experiences were influenced by their country of origin and previous educational background. Students from China, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, and Turkmenistan entered

Kazakhstani schools with different levels of preparedness in Kazakh, Russian, and Cyrillic literacy. These differences affected how easily they could understand lessons, complete written tasks, communicate with teachers and peers, and participate in school life.

Social support was found to be an important factor in the adaptation process. Family encouragement, teacher assistance, and classmate support helped students overcome linguistic barriers and develop greater confidence in communication. However, support was not equally available to all students, and some respondents still reported a lack of assistance. This suggests that schools need more systematic support mechanisms for repatriated Kazakh children.

Overall, the study shows that language learning for repatriated Kazakh children is not only a matter of linguistic competence but also a key part of social participation, identity formation, and belonging in Kazakhstan. Mastery of Kazakh strengthens students' connection with national and cultural identity, while Russian remains important for academic success and wider social interaction. The findings highlight the need for language-bridging programs, additional support in Cyrillic-based academic literacy, beginner and intermediate Russian courses, inclusive classroom practices, and stronger cooperation between schools and families.

Future research should examine students' longitudinal adaptation by considering years since arrival, prior schooling, school language environment, and measured language proficiency. Further studies should also include validated measures of school belonging, well-being, or acculturative stress if psychological adaptation is to be examined directly. This would allow a more comprehensive understanding of the linguistic, social, and psychological dimensions of Qandas children's adaptation in Kazakhstani schools.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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